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ABSTRACT

This brochure for educators discusses underachievement and gifted students. The causes of underachievement are reviewed, which include parents who do not stress the importance of academic achievement and do not set high standards, divorce or strained relations between the family members, peer group pressure, an unchallenging and unmotivating curriculum, teachers who do not appreciate or recognize the student's unique talents and abilities, and gifted students who may not believe that they can do well. Strategies that teachers can use to reverse the underachievement process are outlined, such as: (1) ensure that opportunities are provided for academic challenge within the classroom; (2) provide opportunities for students to pursue topics of interest through independent projects; (3) help underachieving students set realistic goals that they can eventually reach; and (4) encourage students to pursue out of school interests. (CR)

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GIFTED AND TALENTED

WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT AND GIFTED STUDENTS

PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE #A9712

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IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

You have probably seen these students before. They sit in your classroom, obviously bored with what you are teaching, almost defying you to make them learn. The students' performance in most academic areas is below grade level, and it seems as if they do not care whether they improve academically. At times, however, these students do show signs of brilliance, but it is limited to the few learning situations that interest them. The rest of the time they are ambivalent and disinterested. Could these students be gifted underachievers?

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What educators need to know about... UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT and gifted students

Practitioners' Guide - A9712
Bruce N. Berube - Editor
Del Siegle - Series Editor

What is Underachievement?

In basic terms, underachievement is seen as a discrepancy between a student's academic potential and how he or she is actually performing in school. This potential is often revealed through performance on intelligence and achievement tests, as well as observational data. The disparity between potential and actual performance is often quite noticeable for the gifted underachiever.

What Causes Underachievement?

There are a significant number of causes outside of the school setting that can lead to high ability students not realizing their full potential. Important among these are those that relate to the family and the community in which one lives. For example, many gifted individuals underachieve simply because their parents do not stress the importance of academic achievement and how it can translate into success in the future. These parents do not set high standards or expect their children to reach them. The message the child receives is that academic success is not to be valued and therefore, "Why should I try?" Issues such as divorce or strained relations between the child and another family member can result in underachievement as well. The stress often produced in such situations overshadows any interest in performing well at school.

In terms of the community, peer group pressure can be a primary culprit that leads to underachieving among the gifted. Performing well in school may cause a student to be labeled as a "nerd" or other derogatory term. Academic excellence is not valued by many students. To avoid such criticism and be accepted by their social group, talented students often perform below expectations.

While there are many other issues outside of school that can lead to underachievement, educators have little influence on change in these areas. Instead, we should look to the causes of underachievement that occur within our schools and try to remedy such deficiencies. One crucial reason why talented students choose not to excel is that the curriculum they encounter is often unchallenging and unmotivating. High ability students can master material at a much faster rate than average students, but they are rarely given the opportunity to do so. Instead of coping with and trudging through their everyday work they simply refuse to do anything. This lack of challenge can be experienced in a child's early years of schooling and translate later into poor work habits.

Sometimes gifted students may come in contact with teachers who do not appreciate or recognize their unique talents and abilities. Initially, such students are eager to participate in class, so much so that they may be considered annoying and disruptive. Children eventually receive the message that their participation is not valued and their interests are not a concern of the teacher. Such negative feedback can be devastating.

Gifted students may not believe that they can do well. A lack of confidence in their skills inhibits them from attempting tasks at which they do not believe they can succeed. For these students it is easier to not try at all.

What Can Educators Do?

As Davis and Rimm (1994) point out, "Children are not born underachievers. Underachievement is learned behavior, and therefore it can be unlearned" (p. 291). Following are some positive recommendations to help educators enable their students to reverse the underachievement process.

- *Ensure that opportunities are provided for academic challenge within your classroom. High ability students need to be given assignments that challenge them intellectually and enable them to use higher order processes and skills. Gifted students often find the most difficult classes are also the most enjoyable. As Reis, Hébert, Díaz, Maxfield, and Ratley (1995) noted, "Another major factor that students attributed to their successful academic achievement was their involvement in honors' classes" (p. 158).*

- *Provide opportunities for these students to pursue topics of interest through independent projects. Instead of providing "busy work" for students who complete assignments before everyone else, allow them to investigate topics outside the curriculum that they find stimulating. Emerick (1995) studied young adults and found that "the class that provided opportunities for independent study in areas of interest was believed to promote academic excellence" (p. 20).*

- *Help underachieving students set realistic goals that they can eventually reach. Avoid comparing students to others in a competitive atmosphere. Stress your belief that these students can be successful and that you believe they have the potential to do well. Help students recognize their achievements by helping them set and measure their own goals (Siegle, 1995). Your guidance as a teacher cannot be underestimated. Reis et al. (1995) discovered that all of the students they studied "cited teachers at the elementary or junior high school level who had been influential in their school lives . . . who nurtured their belief in self, their motivation, and their overall well-being as young adults" (pp. 149-150).*

- *Encourage students to pursue out of school interests. Underachievers may begin to realize there is a relationship between their interest areas and academic content. As Emerick (1995) stated, "school and academic achievement became relevant because of its usefulness in the area of personal interest" (p. 18).*

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